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Saturday, October 15, 2005

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EDITORIAL:

Need an answer? Go ask a student with a laptop

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Four years ago, former Gov. Angus King raised the technology bar for Maine schools by committing \$37 million over four years to the Maine Learning Technology Initiative. The program has provided Apple laptop computers for every 7th- and 8th-grade student in Maine - about 37,000 in all.

The program ends in June 2006, but the Legislature will begin debate in January on whether Maine should commit future funding. Officials say a similar funding level, about \$10 million per year, will be needed. Yes, that's expensive - but divided among 37,000 middle-schoolers, it comes to less than \$290 per student annually. Is it reasonable to spend that amid difficult economic times? Consider the benefits:

- "Leveling the playing field" may be an overused phrase, but it describes a critical rationale for giving every 7th- and 8th-grader a laptop. This may be 2005, but many lower-income homes in Maine still don't have computers - a distinct disadvantage for many that has been corrected for the last three years.

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- Ready access to information, like the Internet or World Book encyclopedia on each Apple laptop, is an invaluable tool. Students are far more likely to "look it up" in a few key strokes as opposed to finding a hard-copy encyclopedia - if they even have one at home.

- A student with a computer can make creative, multimedia presentations, including slide shows and digital movies. Why is that important? Because communication - from news to business, advertising and entertainment - is rapidly pushing the boundaries of conventional print presentation. The Internet is particularly ripe for multimedia communication, allowing the synthesis of text, audio and video.

- The ability of computers to store and organize information is a great tool for middle-school kids - ask any parent who has seen the loose papers and assignments spilling out of notebooks and backpacks. At this point, about half of Maine's schools don't let the computers be taken home. That's a change that should be made if the program is continued. In general, though, constant access to a laptop allows students to make better, more organized use of study halls and free time. A computer also allows students to compile a database of their work throughout the year.

- Most important, some supporters say, is the ability of one-on-one computers to "engage" students, both inside and outside the classroom. So much of learning depends on attitude, and numerous observations by teachers say laptops have profoundly facilitated student interest.

Not everyone, however, supports the laptop program. Some critics point out that assessment tests of middle-school students who have used the computers are no higher than the tests of students prior to 2002. Comparing scores of different students, however, is a bit like comparing apples to oranges. Moreover, the educational benefits for specific students may not become apparent for several years.

Consider instead, this development: Maine's laptop program has fostered a remarkable number of students networking with teachers and peers. The younger generation tends to be more computer literate than adult teachers, but not every student is a computer whiz. Combine that with lots of computers and you get lots of computer problems. Stepping into that breach, however, is a large group of tech-savvy students who are able and available to help teachers and peers.

These tech-savvy kids are now part of Maine's growing "iTeams." In the first year, the laptop program led to the creation of student activity clubs linked to their use of the Apple iBooks. The iTeam moniker was first used in Cape Elizabeth Middle School, and then adopted by the state as the concept took off, says Tony Sprague, the project manager for the MLTI. Nowadays, there are possibly thousands of iTeam students at schools throughout the state.

The iTeam concept is to have students become the first line of technical help for computer issues. When a problem crops up, teachers or students can turn to an iTeam member - there's often one in each class. Students at some schools have even set up help desks and "office hours" during study halls or lunch

periods.

So far, the MLTI has organized two statewide iTeam conferences. Last year, in Gorham, about 400 students attended, including some from as far away as New Sweden. This past May, an iTeam conference at the University of Maine in Orono attracted nearly 500 students. At the conferences, the students discuss how to set up help desks, exchange tips on technical support and get input from adults on information technology. There are also creative exchanges, as students discuss podcasting or iMovie innovations.

The point not to be missed here is the "human network side." Students are helping students and students are helping teachers. Students are also helping themselves, as they explore and employ real-world applications of knowledge - all because of the laptop program. If ever an educational model was successful, this is it.

A final argument to support the program is addressing worries about damaged or stolen computers. Back in 2002, there were predictions that many 7th- and 8th-graders didn't have the maturity or responsibility to treat computers with respect, leading to costly losses. That has not been the case, however. According to the Maine Department of Education, about 100 laptops have been lost or stolen since 2002, and about 3 percent have been damaged.

Those numbers are small, considering that some 37,000 laptops are being used at 243 schools. In fact, those numbers - and observations of student behaviors - show that the vast majority of laptop participants are respectful stewards of a valuable resource.

With a price tag of \$37 million for four years, the laptop program has not been cheap. Perhaps Maine officials can negotiate a less expensive contract with Apple next year. Even if they can't, however, the 2006 Legislature ought to find a way to continue the program.

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